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Divine Providence in American History and
Politics,

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DISCOURSE

DELIVERED IN THE

SECOND PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH,

NEW-BRUNSWICK, N. J., JULY 4, 1852.

BY

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DISCOURSE.

“WHAT HATH GOD WROUGHT!”

WE deem it appropriate to this day—the Seventy-sixth Anniversary of American Independence—to acknowledge the gracious dealings of God with this nation. We regard our past history as an index to our future destiny. What God has already wrought in this land is the pledge of still greater things to come. He has planted and prospered this nation for important purposes, and those purposes may be learned, in part, from our past history and present condition. It becomes us then not only to acknowledge His providential care in general, but to study the peculiar dispensations of His providence, with a view to determine our present duty, and our future destiny among the nations of the earth.

We propose, therefore, in this discourse, to take a brief religious view of our history and political institutions.

The history of this nation naturally falls into three general periods of nearly equal length. The first may be called the period of Colonization, and extends from the establishment of the first permanent colony in Virginia, in 1607, to the abdication of James II, in 1688. During this period of eighty-one years, the old thirteen colonies were planted and permanently established. During these years our fathers endured hardships and sufferings of which we, their more favored descendants, can scarcely conceive. They suffered from a rigorous and unaccustomed climate, against which they had no sufficient protection. They suffered the lack of healthful and necessary food, before they could subdue the mighty forests, and convert the tangled wilderness into fruitful fields. They suffered from the jealousy and cruelty of the red men—not always without palliation or excuse—who shot down their fathers and brothers as they toiled in the fields at mid-day, or burned their houses and villages at midnight, and captured or tomahawked their wives and mothers and infant children, as they attempted to escape. What was to them more intolerable than all, they suffered from an arbitrary and exacting government in the mother country. At the close of this period their political condition was but little better than slavery. The charters of the colonies had been mostly seque-

tered and cancelled, their legislative assemblies were prohibited, their elective franchises were taken away or rendered useless, religious freedom was denied them, and they were oppressed with burdensome taxes and duties. In answer to their remonstrances the Puritans were coolly told by the servile officers of King James,—“It is not for his majesty’s interest that you should thrive; you have no privilege left you but not to be sold as slaves.” “The Governor invaded liberty and property after such a manner,” said the moderate Increase Mather, “as no man could say anything was his own.”

Such was the condition of these colonies under James II., the last and basest of the Stuarts. Such were the difficulties which our brave forefathers encountered while laying the foundations of this Republic in the wilderness. And yet they never lost confidence in that God who had led them to these shores. Nor did they trust in vain. His watchful providence supplied their wants in the wilderness, shielded them from disease, gave them victory over their revengeful foes, sustained their hearts under untold discouragements, and finally delivered them from an arbitrary and oppressive foreign government. Whoever carefully studies the early history of this country, must feel assured that its infant colonies were under the special protection of the King of kings.

To this succeeded the period of Colonial Government, extending from the accession of William, Prince of Orange, to the British throne, in 1689, to the Declaration of American Independence, in 1776. During these eighty-seven years, our infant colonies remained under a foreign domination more or less favorable to their growth and prosperity. It was a period of immense activity, both in the Old and the New World. Men struggled for freedom of conscience, for religious liberty, for political rights, and for commercial privileges. The struggles of the Old World were transferred to the New, and upon the banks of the St. Lawrence and the Ohio Christian men and savages fought for the claims of England and of France, and for the balance of European political power. The colonists were forced to defend, not only their religious and political rights, but their territory and their lives, against the encroachments of French Catholics and Indian savages.

In these struggles originated the first American Congress. Mutual dangers taught the colonies the necessity of union.* In 1690 the general court of Massachusetts addressed letters of invitation to all the colonies north of Maryland, requesting them to send delegates to New-York to

* Bancroft, vol. iii, p. 183.

consult measures for the public safety. That Congress assembled the same year; and thus Massachusetts originated the idea of an American union. It was the result of weakness and mutual dangers, devised for mutual assistance and protection.

Still the task-masters of Pharaoh vexed and oppressed the struggling colonies.

At length forbearance ceased to be a virtue, and our fathers declared themselves free, and appealed to the God of justice and the God of battles to defend their rights. Intolerance and persecution only strengthened the desire for religious freedom, and political oppression only deepened the love of civil liberty. Amidst these conflicts were formed the characters of those noble patriots who freely staked "their lives, their fortunes, and their sacred honor," in their country's cause. God by his own providence raised up that noble patriot band, and kindled the fire of freedom in their hearts, and trained them in the school of adversity for the work which he had appointed them. Their wrongs and sufferings were the means which God employed to fit them for their destiny.

Our third historical period extends from the Declaration of American Independence, in 1776, to the present time. Of its numerous important historical events, it is not our present purpose to speak. Let us devoutly acknowledge the hand of

Providence in the Revolutionary struggle for freedom. God filled those patriot hearts with courage, and nerved those patriot arms with strength, and presided over the conflict, and gave the victory. He ruled over those subsequent deliberations which gave to this country a free constitution. He has maintained the union of these States, and blessed us with peace and prosperity unprecedented in the history of nations. He has been a wall of fire round about us to protect from foreign invasion and conquest. We stand to-day a free, a united, and a happy nation, because the principles of our free institutions have been implanted and sustained by divine grace in the hearts of the American people. There may they ever remain!

This hasty glance at our past history is enough to show that the hand of God has been busy here, laying the foundation of a mighty power in the earth. "He has not dealt so with any nation." Who can doubt that Infinite Wisdom designs to do a great work for all nations by means of this people? We believe that certain great facts are here to be established, and certain great principles to be developed, which will revolutionize the world and bless all nations.

Let us briefly develop some features of this great Providential plan, as they are suggested by our past history.

And first:—God evidently designed to produce a new type of national character, more vigorous and intellectual than any which preceded us. Men born in three quarters of the world met and struggled upon the American soil. Representatives of ten different European nations, aided by enslaved sons of Africa, contended with the wild men of the forest for possession and for mastery. Long and bravely did the Indian defend his hunting-grounds and the graves of his ancestors. But how could he withstand superior arms and superior skill? His past history is mournful and pathetic. But whatever be his future destiny, he has left an indelible impression upon American history and American character. His history is mingled with ours—written in letters of fire and blood, which attest his courage and his patriotism. And his blood has mingled with the blood of his proud conqueror in the veins of more than one illustrious American orator and patriot.

The African, too, has made an abiding impression upon our institutions, our system of legislation, and our national character.

And while we deeply regret the existence of American slavery, and regard it as the foulest blot upon the pages of our history, and a reproach to our free institutions, we believe the day will come when Africa—made free with the liberty of the Son of God

—will bless the chains and bondage of her sons in this Christian land. We are doing for Africa what despotic Europe did for us when she oppressed our fathers, and taught them in the school of affliction, and drove them forth to found new empires in the wilderness. Present providences indicate that God will overrule both the wrongs of the Indian and the bonds of the African, for the highest good, both temporal and spiritual, of those respective races; and that this nation shall yet prove a blessing to those whom she has oppressed.

But American character was chiefly moulded by the mutual influence of the emigrant bands upon each other. From ten different European countries did the men come who either planted or enlarged the colonies in the United States before the Revolution.* English Royalists and Churchmen settled upon the banks of James River and the Potomac; English Puritans and Commonwealth men took possession of the Connecticut, and the bays of New-England. Emigrants from Holland located upon the Hudson, and founded New-Amsterdam; Swedes and Fins first peopled the banks of the Delaware; French Huguenots found a home upon the shores of the Ashley and the Cooper; Irish Catholics founded Maryland, and Scotch Presbyter-

* Dr. Baird's "Progress of Christianity in the United States."—Bancroft's "History of the United States."

rians made settlements in New-York and New-Jersey; Protestant Poles, and Germans, and even Waldenses, flocked in considerable numbers to our shores, and found a home in one or another of our colonies. How various, how directly opposite were these emigrants in manners and customs, in modes of thought, in religious and political principles! And yet from these various and antagonistic elements, God was about to form a new homogeneous mass, with a new and distinct character, the result of all the other characters combined and melted into one. Yet in some respects there was a common affinity. Nearly all had been persecuted for righteousness' sake. They were men of strong faith and fixed religious principles. They were men of vigorous and active minds, many of them men of learning and cultivation. They were men patient both to suffer and to labor, willing to sacrifice present ease and self-interest for public good and the interests of posterity. They were men independent, courageous, and enterprising, who chose to explore and subdue a new continent, and found a new empire for God, rather than submit to arbitrary oppression and persecution in the land that gave them birth. Such was their general character, and such are the general characteristics of their descendants. "God sifted the nations of the Old World," said Cotton Mather, "in order to bring the best of his

wheat to the New." It is a fixed fact, says an eloquent living preacher,* that men of all nations and languages are here united and Americanized. It seems as if the great God meant of all these materials to "make one new man"—a type of humanity, embracing the separate excellencies of all other forms. The element of power, for good or evil, involved in this unity and nationality, is already immense. What will it be when the "new man"—now comparatively in childhood—shall have grown to the full measure of his destined proportions?

This national character is the result of those providential arrangements which brought together and mingled, and combined, the elements of which it is composed. Who can doubt that God intends, by means of the vigor and the love of intelligence and freedom which he has infused into our national character, to quicken the march of humanity, and renovate the globe.

Divine Wisdom intended to develop here the principles of a free political government. It was reserved for the New World to demonstrate to all nations, and to all time, that a nation with sufficient intelligence, and religious restraint, is capable of self-government. Even after the experiment had been repeatedly tried and failed—even in an

* Dr. Riddle's Sermon—"Our Country for the sake of the World."

age when despots claimed “a divine right” to oppress their subjects; and when churchmen preached “passive obedience to tyrants;” while Locke and Shaftesbury, the great philosopher and the great statesman, were planning a despotic empire in America, and forging a feudal constitution and political chains for unborn millions of serfs—even in such an age God raised up men who had faith in the capability of the popular masses to govern themselves, and who wished to repeat the experiment in the New World. The “Holy Experiment,” as Wm. Penn termed it, was tried, and the experience of three-quarters of a century has pronounced it successful. Henceforth it remains a fixed fact, not only that intelligent and religious men are capable of self-government, but that such a government is the wisest and happiest under which a nation can exist.

We are careful to observe here that the peculiar form of our government is the result of providential arrangements, no less than the free choice of the whole people. It was the result of mutual compromise, growing out of mutual dependence and necessities.

All were desirous of a just and liberal government, but they differed widely as to the peculiar form of that government. Should it be a mild monarchy, remaining under the power and pro-

tection of the British crown, with constitutional guaranties to prevent oppression? Such a system would have suited the gallant cavaliers of Virginia, who had basked in the sunshine of royal favor at home, who had emigrated under the auspices of nobility, and who both hated and feared the Republican violence which they had experienced in the days of the Commonwealth. Should it be a kind of theocratic commonwealth, governed strictly upon religious principles, allowing equal rights, and the largest freedom to all "the faithful," but excluding all who would not subscribe the Calvanistic creed, nor submit to the wholesome discipline of "the Elders?" Such a government would have suited that generation of Puritans which persecuted the Anabaptists, and banished Roger Williams to the wilderness. Let us do these Puritan fathers justice. They were not so much intolerant as deceived by a wrong political theory. They attempted to unite the state with the church, or rather to absorb the state in the church. They persecuted, if persecution it can be called, not on account of religion, but on account of polities. They had come to these shores to found a commonwealth for God, and they intended to govern it according to his Word. They claimed for themselves the right to determine who should be admitted as members of that commonwealth. They judged it not to be for their safety

or their interests to admit other religious sects within their limits. Hence they banished Roger Williams, and persecuted the Quakers, not because they held peculiar religious opinions, but because they persisted in preaching their peculiar doctrines within their territory, and thus sowing seeds of sectarian discord in their midst. They persecuted, not from religious intolerance, but from an erroneous political theory.

A third important party embraced the people of Rhode Island, and the followers of Wm. Penn upon the Delaware and the Schuylkill. They were the advocates of absolute toleration and universal enfranchisement. Believing all men to be equal in point of natural rights and privileges, they desired as far as possible to leave every man to do what was right in his own eyes. The theory of government which they favored was a loose popular democracy.

In point of fact, neither of these three systems of governments was or could be adopted. The conflicting sentiments of the people compelled them to seek some common middle ground, where Royalist, and Quaker, and Commonwealth men, could all meet and unite. That middle ground was a representative republic, founded upon the principles which had been adopted by the Westminster divines for the government of the Presbyterian

Church of Scotland. Thus, if New-England originated the idea of a general Congress, and a union of states, the Presbyterians furnished the model of a government by representatives chosen by the people. And this form was adopted because it contained the elements of a just and popular government, but chiefly because there was no other platform upon which all the extremes could unite. Thus, our government owes its origin and its form to that all-wise Providence which collected, and balanced, and harmonized the elements from which it was composed.

Another great principle to be developed, was the self-sustaining scheme of church organization. From the days of Constantine, the church and the state have been united in the Old World. Even the Reformed churches still cling to the civil government for support in all European countries. It was reserved for this government to demonstrate that the state may safely tolerate all religious denominations, and that the Church can support itself without political aid or interference. The past history and present condition of the American Churches prove beyond a doubt the wisdom and safety of the system. Our present object leads us to remark that the theory of a self-sustaining Church, like that of a representative government, was the result of Providential arrangements. So

various and so opposite were the religious views—even of the early colonists—as to render the establishment of a national Church impossible. The attempt was made. The Episcopal Church was established by law in Virginia, and so remained for more than a century and a half, when the connection was dissolved by the will of the people. When government attempted to enforce the Act of Uniformity in New-England, the people rose in resistance. The same thing occurred in South Carolina and other places. The Puritans soon relinquished the idea of establishing independency, even within their own territories, and opened their gates to the oppressed of every sect. Free toleration to all religious sects, and peculiar privileges to none, were the great principles which Roger Williams was the first to advocate in New-England, and which he established in the colony of Rhode Island. These were the principles for which the Quakers contended everywhere. Free and equal toleration in religion, and universal political enfranchisement, were the main features of the “Holy Experiment” which George Fox and William Penn were anxious to try in the New World. And it is much owing to their influence that these are now the established and cherished principles of our government.

Thus we are brought to the conclusion, that the

experiment of a self-sustaining Church was the result of Providential arrangements. So divided were the sentiments of men on religious subjects, and so balanced one against another, as to render impossible the establishment of any particular Church. Besides, men who had suffered for their religion at home, and who had fled to the wilderness for peace, were glad to obtain quiet by allowing to others the same privileges which they sought for themselves. They had learned in the school of persecution to respect the religious feelings and the conscientious scruples of those who differed from themselves.

Providence seems to have intended this land as a field for the development of Protestant Christianity. Apparently unimportant circumstances prevented this whole continent from falling, first, into the hands of Catholic Spain, and then under the power of Catholic France. God gave it to England, when England was about to become a mighty, Protestant nation. At a time when the Reformation was almost arrested in the Old World, and when persecution threatened utterly to destroy its effects, God opened the gates of this country, that his faithful, persecuted children might enter, and establish free institutions upon the principles which they had adopted. Our fathers were not only exiles, but Protestant exiles—not only pilgrims, but Protestant

pilgrims, banished for the faith once delivered to the saints. Hatred to a persecuting Church, which enslaved both the bodies and the souls of men, was a common tie which united Churchman with Puritan, Lutheran with Anabaptist, Quaker with Huguenot. The God of Heaven gave this land to his persecuted Protestant people. Our past history and our present condition indicate that it is to remain the land of the free, the refuge of the oppressed, and the home of the persecuted. Such it has been for more than two centuries; and still they come with every breeze that blows from the shores of despotism. Men of every nation, every language, and every religion, flock thither to be amalgamated with the general mass, to assume our national character, and to adopt our political and religious principles.

Can we doubt that God intends to do great things for the human race by means of this great nation which he has created? Can we doubt that our country, with its free political government, and its voluntary religious organizations, and its liberal Protestant principles, is destined to stand as a model and a beacon to the nations of the earth? The great God who led our fathers to these shores, and watched over the infant colonies, and by his providence moulded the hearts of the American people, and determined the character of its reli-

gious and political institutions, intended to accomplish some mighty purpose. And until that purpose is fulfilled, the blue arch of heaven is but the inverted hand of the Almighty stretched over our heads to protect us from danger. We have faith in Providence that a glorious destiny awaits our country. The mighty influx of the nations to our shores, as the adventurous and oppressed of every land seek a home beneath the "star-spangled banner," is but an image of the mighty streams of moral and religious influence which shall roll back from this free land, and pervade every continent, every country, and every valley on the globe. Such we believe to be our glorious destiny. God grant that it may be realized.

The providential goodness of the past fills our hearts with hope for the future. "The fathers, where are they?" The weary exiles sleep in peace beneath the soil of their adopted country. The Pilgrims rest from their labors. They have gone to another country, even an heavenly. They came and founded an empire for God, then passed away forever. The hands that signed the charter of our liberties have mouldered back to dust. The eloquent voices that in our early councils plead for freedom and the rights of man, are hushed in death. The noble hearts that swelled with courage and with hope in our Revolutionary conflict, have

ceased to beat forever. They are gone—all gone—to return no more; but being dead, they yet live in their achievements, and in the grateful hearts of a free and happy nation.

God raised up another generation of champions for freedom and the rights of man, and they too are passing away. The booming cannon and the mournful bells which announce the death of Henry Clay, are still ringing in our ears. Those solemn tones bring sadness to a nation's heart. A nation pauses to mingle their tears above his ashes. And well they may, for with all his faults he was one of God's own noblemen. However men may differ from his political views, and however we must condemn the morality of some acts of his early career, even his enemies being judges, he was an honest man, an upright statesman, an able and skilful politician, and a true-hearted patriot. He was an eloquent orator, an accomplished scholar, a faithful friend, and a courteous adversary. He was a friend to religion, especially in his last years, and died professing his belief in the great cardinal doctrines of Christianity, and trusting in the Saviour. What a beautiful scene was that, when the great statesman and his colored servant boy, and the ambassador of Christ, all professed servants of the same Divine Master, united together in that "upper room" in Washington City, to commemorate the

Redeemer's dying love! It was a scene which angels loved to witness.

Perhaps no man, since the great and good Washington, was dearer to the heart of this nation than Henry Clay. Thousands loved him as a brother, and will mourn for him as a father. He needs no warrior's sword or presidential wreath to perpetuate his fame. His epitaph is engraven upon the hearts of his countrymen, and his spirit lives in the great national improvements of the last half century, more enduring than monuments of adamant. In the long flight of years, when we and our children shall be sleeping in the dust—when many a page of history shall have perished—when many a proud name, once deemed immortal, shall have been blotted from the roll of fame and forgotten—when many a lofty monument shall have crumbled into dust, one group of monuments shall stand immortal and imperishable amidst the desolation of ages. There shall be still legible the illustrious names of Washington and Jefferson, of Franklin and of Adams, of Jackson and of Clay.

And yet they were but mortal. They were only great as Providence employed them to work out the destiny of our country. God alone is great. God alone is eternal. God alone can preserve and perpetuate the civil and religious institutions of this happy land. But of this be assured, that He who

has thus far raised up noble patriots and statesmen to die in its cause, and to live for its interests, will not forsake the work of his own hands.

One parting word, and we have done. It is a sacred duty to love and serve such a country as ours, and to transmit its glory and privileges to future generations. This you shall do not by becoming a noisy, blustering politician, not by becoming the obedient slave of a party, not by neglecting your own proper calling to electioneer for hungry office-seekers, not by neglecting the duties of religion to attend to polities and party questions, but by being an honest man, a good citizen, and a true Christian. Serve God and keep his commandments, and he will take care of the interests of your country. Righteousness exalteth a nation, but sin is a reproach to any people. However God has blessed us hitherto, and whatever he has purposed to do for the world by our instrumentality, of this be assured, if we transgress his laws, and forsake his commandments, he will visit our transgressions with a rod, and our iniquity with stripes.

The great purpose of God here is a religious purpose. He brought pious and devoted men here to found a religious empire. Our fathers planted the tree of liberty with faith, and prayer, and fasting, and moistened its roots with their tears and their blood. They planted it for the glory of God, and

committed it to his holy keeping, therefore he blessed it and caused it to grow. It still lives and grows, because he blesses it. If we forsake the God of our fathers, and deny their faith, he will smite it with a curse, and wither it from the root. Fear God and serve him; be honest men, and good citizens, and humble Christians, and God will bless our country to the latest generation.

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